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ABSTRACT

A collaborative project between Georgia College and State University (GC&SU) and Baldwin High School (BHS) in Milledgeville, Georgia, had as its initial goals: to provide an opportunity for two-way mentoring between the GC&SU's Arts and Sciences faculty and BHS's English faculty; to improve curriculum alignment; to establish realistic expectations for both faculties; to assist students in attaining the higher admission standards of the university system; and to strengthen content knowledge of teachers already teaching. This paper discusses the six specific tasks refined from the goals; notes an obstacle to cooperation; and outlines the following six self-appointed tasks: Examine the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) to see if they were being accomplished; Create a list of high school student attitudes toward academic requirements of writing and literary study inconsistent with university expectations; Create a set of recommendations for the two previous tasks; Create a pedagogical basis for QCC's grounded in theory; Create a tracking system for high school students attending GC&SU; and Begin the process of raising the level of performance of BHS students. The paper then discusses the results of the collaborative work on these six items. It also offers suggestions for achieving Quality Core Curriculum standards. It addresses "composition lies our teachers told us," giving some examples. The paper concludes with eight recommendations for successful collaborations based on the BHS/GC&SU experience. (NKA)

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ENGAGING THE DEMONS

Report on a Collaboration between English Faculty of Baldwin High School and Georgia College & State University Milledgeville, Georgia: 2001-02

BY

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BACKGROUND OF THE COLLABORATION

In January, 2001, I was asked to participate in a program that would involve working with a local high school. The program was part of a grant successfully funded through the office of the Dean of Arts & Sciences at Georgia College & State University. While the grant's origins were connected with continuing state and federal projects and mandates, its goals may be fairly precisely state here in terms of the collaboration that occurred between me and Melissa Smith of Baldwin High School in Milledgeville, Georgia.

INITIAL GOALS OF THE PROJECT

1. Provide an opportunity for 2-way mentoring between A&S faculty and HS faculty

2. Improve curriculum alignment

3. Establish realistic expectations for both high school and university faculty

4. Assist students in attaining the higher admission standards of the university system

5. Strengthen content knowledge of teachers already teaching

SPECIFIC TASKS REFINED FROM THE GOALS

1. Align the high school curriculum with the state's Quality Core Curriculum (QCCs)

2. Design realistic and useful senior exit exams

3. Align the high school curriculum with university requirements

4. Create pacing guides to govern the 9-12 language arts curriculum

5. Exchange teaching

AN OBSTACLE TO COOPERATION

The first meeting with the BHS department chair, the high school principal, Melissa Smith, and Dr. Carriere did not go well. The chair of the high school English Department was adamant that all of the goals of the project had been met (at least those identified above as refined tasks), and no collaboration with anyone from the university was necessary. But the principal insisted there would be a collaboration, and he assigned the task to Melissa Smith. Since the original goals of our project had been accomplished, Melissa and I set about making some sense out of the collaboration. We decided to focus on the six self-appointed tasks below:

TASKS WE SET FOR OURSELVES

1. Examine the QCCs in order to
   A. See how the BHS curriculum incorporated them
   B. See if the QCCs were being accomplished outside of curricular intent
   C. Suggest alternative ways of incorporating them

2. Create a list of HS student attitudes toward academic requirements of writing and literary study inconsistent with university expectations and accepted practice

3. Create a set of recommendations for #1 and #2

4. Create a pedagogical basis for the QCCs grounded in theory

5. Create a tracking system for BHS students attending GC&SU

6. Begin the process of raising the level of performance of BHS students

RESULTS OF OUR WORK ON THE 6 ITEMS ABOVE

ITEM #1: EXAMINE THE QUALITY CORE CURRICULUM

Melissa Smith immediately began an investigation of the first 25 QCCs; these are the ones that apply to the entire 9-12 language arts curriculum. There are other QCCs for each specific area of the curriculum--e.g., American Literature, British Literature, and Composition--but the first 25 cover language arts in general for grades 9-12. Melissa's task was to create for each QCC a subset of suggestions for dealing with them. This task met the goals of establishing realistic expectations for both high school and university faculty, assisting students in attaining high admission standards of the university system, and strengthening the content knowledge of teachers already teaching.

ITEM #2: CREATE A LIST OF STUDENT ATTITUDES INCONSISTENT WITH COMMON PRACTICE IN WRITING AND READING

Dr. Carriere began work on this task. It came from the common need in first-year university courses to disabuse students of erroneous rules of writing and of analyzing literature. We never got to the literary portion of this item, but the writing portion developed into a presentation at a regional conference on first-year success in teaching composition held annually at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. This part of our collaboration met the grant's general goals of 2-way mentoring, establishing realistic expectations for both high school and university faculty, strengthening content knowledge of teachers already teaching, and aligning the high school curriculum with university requirements.

ITEM #3: CREATE A SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR #1 AND #2

Melissa's work consisted almost entirely of creating recommendations for the first 25 QCCs. My work on a list of erroneous student attitudes, because it delineates practices inconsistent with university requirements, contains automatic implications about improvement. However, no list of suggestions was ever constructed.

ITEM #4: CREATE A PEDAGOGICAL BASIS FOR THE QCCs GROUNDED IN THEORY

This item was never begun and remains an unfinished, perhaps overly ambitious, task.

ITEM #5: CREATE A TRACKING SYSTEM FOR BHS STUDENTS ATTENDING GC&SU

This item was accomplished early on. The university's statistics office compared the GPA of BHS students in high school to their grades in selected courses at GC&SU their first year. The data showed that the grades earned by BHS students during their first year at GC&SU were mostly similar to the grades earned at BHS.

ITEM #6: BEGIN THE PROCESS OF RAISING THE LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE OF BHS STUDENTS

Diane Zigo's article in *English Education*, "Constructing Firebreaks against High-Stakes Testing" made a timely appearance midway through our collaboration. Recognizing that the desire of school principals and superintendents for the students in their school systems to do better on standardized tests might mean teaching for the test, Zigo studied a school in rural Georgia that had successfully raised its students' performances without teaching the tests. Her article contained explicit descriptions of how this rural system had been able to increase the performance of its students. I photocopied the article and gave it to the BHS principal, thinking that perhaps our collaboration might move toward examining the suggestions made in the article. Toward the end of the semester, however, I learned that BHS was going to offer classes that taught the SAT to seniors, indicating that the insights in the Zigo article had either gone unnoticed or unheeded or had perhaps been perceived as too long-term to solve an urgent problem.

Suggestions for Achieving Quality Core Curriculum Standards:
Looking Beyond Traditional Classroom Activities

Melissa Smith's work on QCC items 1, 2, 7, 22:

QCC #1 *Reads poems, short stories, essays, novels, magazines, newspapers, charts, graphs, and technical documents for pleasure and self-improvement.*

SUGGESTED STUDENT-CENTERED ACTIVITIES

Free reading time within the school day or within a given class period is a promising way to meet this objective.

PROMOTING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Providing free time to read is a good way to promote student involvement. Also having various reading materials in the classroom will give the student a chance to browse (for pleasure) and perhaps find something new to read/learn (self-improvement). The teacher should allow students to bring reading materials from home that promote the objectives of this QCC.

MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Is the student reading on his own without any external motivators? If so, he is achieving this objective. Simple observation and record keeping works well.

NECESSARY TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

We must be realistic about what "for pleasure and self improvement" means. Things a student reads without any external motivators (such as a grade) fall under this definition. Even if studenta are "off task" in class by reading magazines they have brought with them, they may be reading for pleasure or self-improvement.

NON-TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Students may read for pleasure at any time, even (and perhaps especially) when they should be attending to other tasks in class. Students reading a magazine when the class is reading aloud from a play, for example, are still meeting this objective.

PROMOTING AWARENESS OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STUDENTS

This objective is to promote student reading for the sake of reading. Because reading in school is valuable, interest in mainstream periodicals meets the goals of this QCC. Awards for reading would help promote the goals of this QCC. Faculty and administrators might "be caught" reading for pleasure, and students should not fear being recognized for reading, perhaps even at inopportune moments.

QCC #2 *Reads critically, asks pertinent questions, recognizes assumptions and implications, and evaluates ideas.*

SUGGESTED STUDENT-CENTERED ACTIVITIES

Any class reading activity, no matter how formal or informal, can contribute to achieving the goals of this QCC. Informal activities might include articles students bring from home about things in which they have a passionate interest. Discussions of these articles could require critical reading skills--how students interpret authors' meanings, for example.

PROMOTING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

As students read, even simply for pleasure, they could be asked to keep reading logs creatively designed to promote the objectives of this QCC. They might contain questions and/or predictions the students have during the course of their reading. A preliminary activity of listing ideas and assumptions based on titles of works, or pictures and graphs, might promote involvement by keeping the students' interests during the actual reading.

MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Class discussions of predictions and whether or not they prove true would assure the teacher that students have been reading critically. Discussions of log entries might do the same.

NECESSARY TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Teachers would have to be open to discussing informal readings and logs as well as more academic and curricular units of study. Teachers would need to create logs and activities that promote the goals of the QCC.

NON-TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Students make assumptions and predictions in a wide variety of situations, from watching music videos to reading reviews of upcoming movies. Thus the they can achieve the objectives of this QCC in many non-traditional ways. For example, students very often talk about what they do in other classes, which suggests that the English teacher can measure achievement with open discussions that students initiate.

PROMOTING AWARENESS OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STUDENTS

For all of us, reading critically is manifested in the desire to discuss in various settings things we have read. Rules that control discussion times too rigidly might conflict with achieving the objectives of this QCC. Therefore an environment that fosters the QCC by allowing for open discussions to occur would be appropriate. Open discussion time not tied specifically to class units has the potential to generate questions, predictions, and ideas that students have developed through reading.

QCC #7 *Distinguishes between fact and opinion.*

SUGGESTED STUDENT-CENTERED ACTIVITIES

Activities for meeting this objective include using students' opinions about certain issues versus the facts about those issues. Historical events are good starting points; an example is discussing what students imagine daily life to have been like in Elizabethan England, and then discussing factual data about that time. Another idea might be to examine types of advertising and the use of opinion disguised as fact.

PROMOTING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Allowing students to voice their opinions freely (within reasonable terms) can spark very productive class discussions. Depending on the particular activity, students could write down ideas about a topic and distinguish between what they believe is fact and what they believe is opinion. Then, in discussion, if any opinions have been mistakenly labeled as facts, the teacher and class can correct the error.

MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Formal assessments in which students make such distinctions can measure achievement, but so can informal debates in class, or one-on-one discussions between teacher and student.

NECESSARY TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

The line between fact and opinion is sometimes a fine one, especially in areas such as philosophical and religious beliefs. Recognizing that not all topics can be easily divided between what is fact and what is opinion will help avoid conflicts that detract from the objective.

NON-TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Propaganda exists in many areas of daily life. Political bias based on opinions may be presented as facts. Extracurricular groups try to entice students to join by appealing to emotions rather than statistics. Distinguishing between fact and opinion is a skill needed in all facets of life.

PROMOTING AWARENESS OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STUDENTS

As mentioned above, fact and opinion are not always easily separated, though we can guide students to recognize characteristics that form the bases for both.

QCC #22 *Defends conclusions rationally.*

SUGGESTED STUDENT-CENTERED ACTIVITIES

Activities for this objective logically can be paired with those suggested for QCC #14. Once students have learned to use reasoning skills before drawing conclusions, they can explain their rationale for having come to those conclusions. Activities which go specifically with this objective will encourage the students to persuade others to believe that their conclusions are sensible. Therefore, exercises in persuasion could also aid in achieving this objective.

PROMOTING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The teacher can encourage students to explain their opinions about a variety of things. When they give opinions, the teacher can also guide them to realize the processes by which they came to those opinions. Keeping notations as one reads or listens to a presentation can help him analyze his own process for reaching a specific conclusion.

MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

If the student is aware of how he came to a conclusion, and if he can respond to questions about his conclusion with answers others can understand and go along with, the teacher has met this goal of helping students defend their own conclusions.

NECESSARY TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Defending a conclusion rationally does not mean that the conclusion will always be a universal one. What is important is that the student can defend himself by showing a logical process by which he came to that conclusion.

NON-TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

When students give excuses for behavior, or when they explain why they have said something in particular, they are defending their conclusions.

PROMOTING AWARENESS OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STUDENTS

Always asking "Why?" when others speak and act will lead those people to defend their conclusions and will promote logical thinking and "rational" defense of our own conclusions.

COMPOSITION LIES OUR TEACHERS TOLD US

A sample of Pete Carriere's work on student attitudes inconsistent with common practice in writing (delivered at a writing conference at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia on February 1, 2002)

At the university level, composition teachers each year must disabuse students of erroneous rules about writing. These rules may have occurred in elementary, middle grades, or high school. By the time students reach their first-year college composition class they have often become absolutes that have the power of myth. Each of these rules may have a usefulness in a particular stage of the curriculum as students are learning to write. But they should have been replaced by a more complex awareness by the time students graduate from high school.

SAMPLES FROM COMPOSITION LIES:

1. Never use the first-person pronoun in an essay.

This rule is absolutely inconsistent with common practice, especially when writing personal essays, whether argument, persuasion, expository, or especially narration. The world's great essays often begin in first person and maintain that focus throughout. It is appropriate to avoid the first-person pronoun in technical manuals, advertising, instructions, feasibility studies, and even some types of academic writing. But even the great academic scholars of our time invoke themselves. Here are some examples of well-known authors using the first person pronoun.

Henry David Thoreau from the Journals - "If there is any hell more unprincipled than our rulers and our people, I feel curious to visit it."

George Orwell from "Shooting an Elephant" - "And suddenly I realized I should have to shoot the elephant after all."

Lillian Hellman from "Runaway" - "I had four dollars and two bits. . . ."

Langston Hughes from "Salvation" - So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie. . . ."

Charles Dickens, "Concluding Remarks" from *American Notes* - "But I may be pardoned, if on such a theme as the general character of the American people . . . I desire to express my own opinions in a few words. . . ."

2. *The five-paragraph essay*

If two paragraphs are better than one, then three must be better than two, four must be better than three, and five--OK, so I'm being a bit facetious. Certainly when students are beginning to become aware of paragraphing and of the necessity to develop thoughts, using a specific number of paragraphs as a goal has usefulness. However, for mature writers the number of paragraphs we write will be determined mostly by the focus of our thesis since it takes lots of words to develop a thought with specifics and details. However, coordinating length with thesis focus is intellectually challenging, and it would be foolhardy to expect middle grades students to be able to do it. But a thesis focus consistent with essay length is a requirement of my first-year composition courses. Since these students master the concept within the first two or three essays, I believe it is possible to introduce the concept at the high school level and wean students away from something so arbitrary and misleading as the five-paragraph essay.

From the essays listed in #1 above:

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"- 14 paragraphs

Lillian Hellman's "Runaway" - 62 (includes dialog)

Langston Hughes's "Salvation" - 15 paragraphs (850 words or 3 ½ pages of typed, double-spaced manuscript)

Charles Dickens's "Concluding Remarks" - 22 paragraphs

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS BASED ON THE BHS/GC&SU EXPERIENCE

1. Obtain the support of the administration - Collaborative projects must have the support of the public school system's administration, including the school board, the superintendent, the curriculum director and the principal.

2. Obtain the support of department chairs - The support of the public school department chair is essential. Our lack of support from this quarter prevented us from either suggesting or implementing any changes in current practice.

3. Obtain the support of the department's entire faculty - The members of the faculty should support the project so that any suggestions for change could be discussed openly with a view toward modifying current practice in beneficial ways.

4. Involve several faculty members - The collaboration would be strengthened if more than one member of the faculty, perhaps on both sides, were involved.

5. Include a mechanism for instituting modifications- Scheduled meetings among all participants for evaluation and suggesting modifications based on the insights gained by the collaboration should be in place.

6. Include a mechanism for continuation - Since beneficial insights can emerge from collaborative efforts such as this one, every effort should be made to make sure that these insights become part of a continuing forum for change.

7. Interview more than one school system in order to ensure the best possible match among the members of the collaboration, all of whom should enthusiastically support the project and be open to beneficial, innovative change.

8. Include some form of remuneration for faculty participating in the collaboration.

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